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Contemplation, *intellectus* and *simplex intuitus* in Aquinas: Recovering a Neoplatonic Theme.¹

Rik Van Nieuwenhove

Abstract. This contribution examines two related points in relation to Aquinas's understanding of contemplation (a sorely neglected topic in scholarship). First, (a) after having outlined that the final act of contemplation culminates in an intellective (or non-discursive), simple apprehension of the truth (especially divine truth) I will examine how this act relates to the three operations of the intellect (grasping of quiddity; judgement; reasoning) Aquinas identifies in a number of places. This brings me to a second, more substantial claim, namely, (b) that his view of contemplation as simple insight is significantly indebted to Neoplatonic sources: therefore, we cannot interpret Aquinas's views on contemplation in Aristotelian terms solely but we must also pay attention to the way he introduces Neoplatonic elements into his Aristotelian framework. I conclude this contribution by suggesting some reasons—of a theological nature—why Aquinas would have been drawn towards a non-discursive or 'intuitive' notion of contemplation.

¹ An initial draft of this paper was presented in October 2015 at University of Notre Dame; I am deeply grateful to Professor Joseph Wawrykow for his encouragement and giving me the opportunity to share my work. I would also like to thank wholeheartedly Dr Katja Krause, University of Durham, and the reviewers of *ACPQ* for their many constructive suggestions and highly detailed and most expert critique of an earlier draft of this paper.

Some years ago Thomas Hibbs noted that it is “surprising how little attention” has been devoted by Thomist scholars to the topic of contemplation, despite the pivotal role it occupies in how Aquinas conceives of the good life.² It is fair to say that this observation stands, despite some recent contributions.³ While important scholarship has considered in detail Aquinas’s views on the beatific vision and his indebtedness to Islamic and early-Latin

² Thomas S. Hibbs, “Interpretations of Aquinas’s Ethics since Vatican II” in Stephen Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 421. For the importance of contemplation for human fulfilment, see for instance *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 5; *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: *contemplatio divinae veritatis... est finis totius humanae vitae*.

³ Apart from a rather brief (and somewhat abrasive) discussion of Aquinas’s notion of contemplation by Simon Tugwell in his book *Albert and Thomas. Selected Writings*. Classics of Western Spirituality (NY: Paulist Press, 1988), 279–86, a helpful discussion in Bernard McGinn’s *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*. Vol. IV of *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (NY: Herder & Herder, 2005), 27–38 and a recent study by Edyta Imai (dealing with contemplation and emotions), entitled *Thomas Aquinas on Contemplation and the Human Animal* (Saarbrücken: Scholars’ Press, 2013) relatively little has been published in the English-speaking world on the subject in the last forty years. In the francophone world Jean-Pierre Torrell has engaged with the subject, and there is a probing article by Adriano Oliva in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 96 (2012): 585–662, entitled “La Contemplation des Philosophes selon Thomas d’Aquin.” Before this we need to go back to Josef Pieper’s *Happiness and Contemplation* (IN: St Augustine Press, 1996), which explicitly addresses the intellectual nature of contemplation.

sources,⁴ the topic of contemplation remains rather neglected.

In this contribution I want to revisit this theme, and discuss two related points. First, (a) I will outline that the final act of contemplation culminates in an intellective (or non-discursive), simple apprehension of the truth (especially divine truth)⁵ and I will examine how this simple insight into truth relates to the three operations of the intellect (grasping of quiddity; judgement; reasoning) Aquinas identifies in a number of places in his writings. This brings me to a second claim, namely, (b) that his view of contemplation as simple insight or *intuitus simplex* is significantly indebted to Neoplatonic sources: therefore, we cannot interpret Aquinas's views on contemplation in Aristotelian terms solely but we must also pay attention to the way he introduces Neoplatonic elements into his Aristotelian framework.

In relation to (a): my claim is not simply that contemplation involves the theoretical intellect (*nous, intellectus*), as distinct from the practical intellect. This would be a trivial claim. It is more specific: Aquinas characterises the acme of the contemplative act in terms of *intuitus simplex*,⁶ a notion which has received little attention in recent scholarship. Given

⁴ For a recent contribution on Latin sources, with helpful references to literature, see Katja Krause, "Remodelling Ultimate Human Happiness: Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on the Sentences and his Sources," *Divus Thomas* 118 (2015): 15–56.

⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4

⁶ There are a number of studies on the topic of "intuition" of the intellect in Aquinas: Michel Nodé-Langlois, "L'Intuitivité de l'intellect selon Thomas D'Aquin," *Revue Thomiste* 100 (2000): 179–203; Régis Jolivet, "L'Intuition Intellectuelle," *Revue Thomiste* 37 (1932): 52–70; Thomas Fay, "The Intellectual Intuition in Thomas Aquinas," *Sapientia* 27 (1974): 352–9.

Aquinas's indisputable debt to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*⁷ claim (b) is perhaps the more surprising one, although it coheres with recent re-readings of Aquinas that are more sensitive to his non-Aristotelian sources, especially in his moral theology and metaphysics. Still, even those scholars (Bradley, Tugwell, Sommers) who do discuss contemplation in Aquinas have paid insufficient attention to the intellectual nature of contemplation (claim a), and the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio* that is so central to it.⁸ A recent contribution by Mary Catherine Sommers, no matter how helpful otherwise, also fails to mention the non-

See also chapter 4 from Therese Scarpelli-Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷ See for instance *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 1 where Aquinas offers eight reasons why he considers the contemplative life more excellent (*potior, excellentius, melior*) than the active life: each argument—perhaps somewhat provocatively—contains a reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, side by side with one to a Christian source (usually Scripture, or Augustine or Gregory the Great).

⁸ In his wide-ranging and comprehensive book *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good. Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997) Denis Bradley does not pay any major attention to the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, or the intellectual nature of contemplation on earth. The same observation applies to Simon Tugwell's admittedly short treatment of contemplation in his book *Albert and Thomas*, 279–86, and Edyta Imai's book *Thomas Aquinas on Contemplation and the Human Animal*. Bernard McGinn, in a characteristically brilliant contribution, discusses the intuitive aspect on p. 32 of *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*.

discursive aspect of contemplation, and the contrast between *intellectus* and *ratio*.⁹ Hence, with the exception of McGinn's brief discussion, we have to go back to Bernard Lonergan's articles (which originally appeared in the 1940s and which were republished in his book *Verbum*)—although they dealt mainly with understanding rather than with contemplation as such—and Josef Pieper's *Happiness and Contemplation*, originally published (in German) in 1958. In short, during the last sixty years the non-discursive nature of Aquinas's notion of contemplation has not received any major scholarly attention.

The distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* had been discussed in Pierre Rousselot's book, *L'Intellectualisme de Saint Thomas*, published first in 1908, and was treated at length in the study by Julien Péghaire, *Intellectus et Ratio selon Thomas d'Aquin* published in 1936. While both authors should be credited with reminding us of the distinction between intellect and reason, neither examined in any detail the importance of this distinction for our understanding of the Thomist notion of contemplation.¹⁰

⁹ In fairness, her contribution is part of a collection of essays in which the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas is being highlighted. If my argument holds, this lacuna is not surprising in that context: Mary Catherine Sommers, "Contemplation and Action in Aristotle and Aquinas" from Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (eds), *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 167–86.

¹⁰ There is an English translation of Rousselot's seminal work by Andrew Mallon as Pierre Rousselot, *Intelligence. Sense of Being, Faculty of God. Vol. I of The Collected Philosophical Works* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1999). Julien Peghaire, *Intellectus et Ratio selon Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1936) retains its value. I should also mention in this context Bernard Lonergan's *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas. Collected Work of Bernard Lonergan. Vol. II* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

As is well-known, *ratio* covers a wide range of meanings in scholastic thought, such as concept, intention, definition, exemplar, idea, cause, proof, meaning, and *ratio particularis* or cogitative power. In what follows I will use it as denoting our capacity for, or act of discursive reasoning. In a general sense it is the act or capacity which distinguishes humans from separate intelligences (angels and God).¹¹ Aquinas uses *ratio* to refer to both the act of discursive reasoning¹² or to the faculty of human intelligence in general, which operates discursively, although not exclusively so. In both cases—as act or faculty—the discursive dimension is being contrasted with the intellective one.¹³ In *ST* I, q. 59, a. 1, ad1, for instance, we read: “the intellect knows by simple intuition, while reason knows by a process

¹¹ See for instance *De Ver.* q. 24, a. 3, ad1

¹² As in *ST* II-II, q. 49, a. 5, ad3

¹³ See also *De Ver.* q. 24, a. 3, ad1: “Reason is sometimes taken broadly for any immaterial cognition; and in this sense reason is found in God (...). It is also taken properly, as meaning a power which knows with discourse (*cum discursu*). In this sense reason is not found in God or the angels, but only in men.” Other key texts which emphasise the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* include: I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad4 (with a reference to Ps-Dionysius); II *Sent.* d. 9, q. 1, a. 8, ad1 (Ps-Dionysius); *De Ver.* q. 5, a. 1, ad5 (with a reference to Boethius); q. 8, a. 15 (Ps-Dionysius); q. 15, a. 1 (Boethius and Ps-Dionysius); q. 24, a. 3 (no reference); *Expos. De Trin.* q. 2, a. 2 (no reference); q. 6, a. 1 (Boethius); *ST* I, q. 58, a. 3 (no reference) and a. 4 (Ps.-Dionysius); I, q. 59, a. 1, ad1 (no reference); I, q. 79, a. 8 (Ps-Dionysius); I, q. 79, a. 8, ad2 (Boethius); II-II, q. 8, a. 1 obj. 2 (Ps-Dionysius); I, q. 83, a. 4 (no reference); II-II, q. 9, a. 1, ad1 (no reference); II-II, q. 180, a. 3 (Ps-Dionysius).

of discursion from one thing to another.”¹⁴

Intellectus and its cognates also cover a wide range of meanings. In *De Ver.* q. 17, a. 1 Aquinas writes that the term *intellectus* sometimes signifies the thing understood (*res intellecta*); sometimes, it signifies the intellectual power itself (*potentia intellectiva*); sometimes a habit; and sometimes an act. In what follows I will focus mainly on three of these meanings, namely the faculty of understanding in general, the activity of human understanding, and the habit of *intellectus*. As a *habitus* it can refer to the intellectual virtue of understanding (which Aristotle refers to in his *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 1140b30); or it can refer to one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Is. 11.2-3—a topic I will be touching upon towards the end of this contribution.

As will become clearer, *intellectus*, as distinct from discursive *ratio*, refers to understanding in an immediate fashion, either as angels do who enjoy an intellectual intuition through the intermediary of the innate intelligible species, or as humans do: in our case it refers to the moment of insightful understanding, which remains distinct from, but grounds and fulfils, the ratiocinative process;¹⁵ and it is in this crowning act that contemplation comes to fruition.

¹⁴ For all translations from Aquinas’s works (with the exception of *Sent.*) I have borrowed from [www. http://dhspriority.org/thomas/](http://dhspriority.org/thomas/)

¹⁵ See, for instance: II *Sent.* d. 9, q. 1, a. 8, ad1: *In cognitionem veritatis ratio inquirendo perveniat, quam intellectus simplici intuitu videt*; ST I, q. 59, a. 1, ad1: *Intellectus et ratio differunt quantum ad modum cognoscendi: quia scilicet intellectus cognoscit simplici intuitu, ratio vero discurrendo de uno in aliud.*

Let us open the discussion with a major quotation from *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8. Reiterating an argument he had made more extensively in *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1. Aquinas argues that *intellectus* and *ratio* are not different powers. However, the one faculty of human cognition has nonetheless two distinct operations, a rational-discursive and an intellective one:

Reason and intellect in man cannot be distinct powers. We shall understand this clearly if we consider their respective actions. For to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth (*intelligere enim est simpliciter veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere*): and to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth. And therefore angels, who according to their nature, possess perfect knowledge of intelligible truth, have no need to advance from one thing to another; but they apprehend the truth simply and without mental discursion, as Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* VII). But man arrives at the knowledge of intelligible truth by advancing from one thing to another; and therefore he is called rational. Reasoning, therefore, is compared to understanding, as movement is to rest, or acquisition to possession; of which one belongs to the perfect, the other to the imperfect. And since movement always proceeds from something immovable, and ends in something at rest; hence it is that human reasoning, by way of inquiry and discovery (*secundum viam inquisitionis vel inventionis*), advances from certain things simply understood—namely, the first principles; and, again, by way of judgment (*in via iudicii*) returns by analysis (*resolvendo*) to first principles, in the light of which it examines what it has found. Now it is clear that rest and movement are not to be referred to different powers, but to one and the same, even in natural things: since by the same nature a thing is moved towards a certain place.

The full implications of this quotation will become clearer throughout this paper, especially after we have compared it with *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 3. For now I mention the following points,

which will detain our attention: first, reason and intellect, while not different powers (*potentiae*), are nonetheless distinct, “as movement is to rest.” This echoes Boethius’s *De Consol. Phil.* IV,¹⁶ which Aquinas routinely refers to when contrasting *ratio* and *intellectus*, such as in *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1, or *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1. We will discuss a number of these passages below. Secondly, as is the case here as well, when describing how through a process of discursive reasoning we arrive at knowledge of simple intelligible truth, Aquinas also regularly—perhaps more often—refers to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. Finally (and related to this), he claims that through our intellectual knowledge we share, no matter how inadequately, in angelic knowledge, which is purely intuitive or non-discursive: “human nature, insofar as it comes in contact with the angelic nature, must both in speculative and practical matters know truth without investigation.”¹⁷ Hence, we cannot fully grasp what Aquinas has to say on intellection and contemplation without touching on the topic of angelic cognition. I will return to the two ways of reasoning (i.e., the *via inventionis* and the *via iudicii*) at a later stage as well. For now, let’s simply note (to be explained in greater detail when discussing *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 3) that the acme of contemplation consists in simple

¹⁶ There are two passages from *De Consol. Phil.* which Aquinas regularly quotes: IV, *prosa* 6: *Igitur uti est ad intellectum ratiocinatio, ad id quod est id quod gignitur, ad aeternitatem tempus, ad punctum medium circulus, ita est fati series mobilis ad providentiae stabilem simplicitatem.* (see for instance: *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8, obj. 2 and Aquinas’s reply 2), and V 4, where Boethius distinguishes between *sensus*, *imaginatio*, *ratio*, and *intellegentia*. In relation to the latter he writes: *Intelligentiae vero celsior oculus existit; supergressa namque universitatis ambitum ipsam illam simplicem formam pura mentis acie contuetur.*

¹⁷ *De Ver.* q. 16, a. 1

apprehension of truth. How it relates to the three operations of the intellect will be discussed now.

I.

The Three Operations of the Intellect and the Crowning Contemplative Act

In accordance with the third book of *De Anima* (III, 6; 430a26ff) and other loci in the Aristotelian corpus, Aquinas usually identifies only two operations of the intellect, i.e., the understanding of indivisibles, through which we apprehend the essence of a thing, and combining (affirmation) and distinguishing (negation) in judgement.¹⁸

The first operation consists in the understanding of indivisibles or the grasping the quiddity of things, and this occurs in a twofold sense. It can refer to perception of something at an inchoative level which, for Aquinas, involves the agent intellect. Here no falsity can occur.¹⁹

¹⁸*In Meta.* VI lect. 4 (no. 1232): “The intellect has two operations. One of these is called the understanding of indivisibles, and this is the operation by which the intellect forms simple concepts of things by understanding the whatness of each one of them. The other operation is that by which the intellect combines and separates.” See also *In Meta.* IV lect. 6 (no. 605); *In De An.* III, lect. 9 (nos 760–2); *De Ver.* q. 14, a. 1; *I Sent.* d. 19, q. 5, a. 1, ad7; *Expos. De Trin.* q. 5, a. 3; compare *De Ver.* q. 1, a.12.

¹⁹ As the sensing of proper sensibles is always true, so the intellect is always true in knowing what a thing is. Cf. *De Ver.* q. 1, a. 12; *ST I*, q. 17, a. 3: “the intellect is not deceived about the essence of a thing, as neither the sense about its proper object.” See also, amongst other places: *ST I*, q. 85, a. 6 and a. 6, ad1. For a discussion of Aquinas’s views on this, see John

It is the outcome of a complex process, the details of which need not detain us here.

Simplifying matters we can summarise as follows: after receiving the sensible species a phantasm is generated, from which the agent intellect abstracts an intelligible species, which is transformed into a mental concept (e.g., “a fly”).²⁰ The first operation of the intellect can also refer, secondly, to grasping the essence of something after a process of reasoning, and this is the result of a laborious process, which is prone to error.²¹

The second act refers to composition and division of things that are understood. Aquinas calls this judgement (e.g., “Socrates is white.”).

In the *Prooemium* to the *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, however, he mentions a third operation, which is proper to reasoning itself (as discursive-ratiocinative): “it is the act by which we proceed from one thing to another, so as to arrive at a knowledge of

Jenkins, “Aquinas on the veracity of the intellect” in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1991): 623–32 and Norman Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. vol. 17 (1991): 159–94

²⁰ For a helpful and concise outline, see Eleonore Stump, “The mechanisms of cognition” from her book *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 244–76; and Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature. A Philosophical Study of Summa theologiae Ia 75-89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267–329.

²¹ In *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 91.5 Aquinas points out that our grasp of the quiddity of things in this sense is fallible: “We, however, make guesses as to the quiddities of things from their accidents and effects.” See Martin Pickavé, “Human Knowledge” in Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 311–26, at 323. See also Kretzmann, “Infallibility, Error, and Ignorance.”

the unknown from the known.”²² As this quotation suggests, identifying a third act allows Aquinas to explain how new knowledge can be generated through a process of reasoning. In this context Aquinas considers, in turn, three different kinds of reasoning processes, depending on the degree of certainty we attain. The first is the way of judgement (*via iudicii*), which leads to *scientia* or certain knowledge. By way of judgement we return by analysis to first principles, in light of which we examine what we have found (*in via iudicii, resolvendo redit ad prima principia, ad quae inventa examinat*).²³ Here we judge with certitude about effects by resolving them into their first principles.²⁴ The second process is inquiry (*via inquisitionis vel inventionis*), by which we advance from certain things simply understood, namely first principles (*secundam viam inquisitionis vel inventionis, procedit a quibusdam*

²² *In Post. An. I*, Prooemium. I have used the English translation by Richard Berquist from St Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* (IN: Dumb Ox Books, 2007). See also *ST I*, q. 85, a. 5 for the three cognitive acts.

²³ *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8

²⁴ Although I cannot develop it within the constraints of this contribution, it should be mentioned that this ‘analytic’ move should not be misinterpreted in terms of Cartesian deduction. In the words of Paul Durbin: “Aristotle and St Thomas do not begin with self-evident principles and derive conclusions therefrom in a rationalist-deductive mode (...); rather, they begin with a statement to be justified (...) and ‘reduce’ it back to its ultimate explanatory principles.” Paul Durbin, trans., *St Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologiae*, vol. 12 (NY: Blackfriars and McGraw-Hill, 1968), 82 note, quoted by Stump, *Aquinas*, 239. Thus we reach *scientia*, by finding causal explanations for things (Cf. *In Post. An. II.1: scire est causam rei cognoscere*).

simpliciter intellectis, quae sunt prima principia).²⁵ Here we do not always arrive at certitude, and what is discovered must therefore be submitted to judgement before certitude is possible.²⁶ Aquinas enumerates various degrees among the rational processes which lack certitude but within the confines of this paper there is no need to elaborate on these.²⁷ In a third rational process we fail to attain truth.²⁸

Of the three cognitive operations Aquinas identifies, both the first—grasping the quiddity—and the second operation are non-discursive or intellective.²⁹ When we grasp the first

²⁵ *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8

²⁶ *In Post. An. I*, Prooemium: *Nam inventio non semper est cum certitudine*.

²⁷ As Aquinas explains in the Prooemium of *In Post An.*, dialectics starts from probable premises. Here our reason fully accepts one view, though not without some fear that the opposite view might be true. Rhetoric concerns the rational process in which we are inclined towards one view, without fully accepting it. In poetics we are drawn towards a view by a kind of regard or esteem resulting from the way something is represented.

²⁸ Sophistics concerns itself with this, as Aquinas observes in Prooemium of *In Post. An.*

²⁹ See also *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1, ad5: “In us, it is the same faculty [a] which knows the simple quiddities of things, [b] which forms propositions, and [c] which reasons. The last of these is proper to reason, as reason; the other two can also belong to understanding, as understanding. Hence, the second is found in angels, since they know through many species, but only the first is found in God, who understands all things, simple and composite, by knowing his own essence.” See also *De Ver.* q. 8, a. 15 (after quoting *De Div. Nom.* VII.3): “just as we know principles by simple intuition without discourse, so do the angels know all they know in the same fashion.”

principles of knowledge—whether they be universal concepts such as *ens* or universal judgements (such as the principle of non-contradiction)—we do so in an immediate and intuitive manner.³⁰ Aquinas often describes the first operation by developing an analogy with our sense impressions, adopted from Aristotle’s *De Anima* III.6 (430b27), and in this context he likes to use visual metaphors:³¹ the intellect perceives (*speculetur*) the universal in the individual (*ST* I, q. 84, a. 7); the intellect can behold (*intueri*) the intelligible object in its

³⁰ Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good...*, 328–30 makes the stronger claim that Aquinas does not hesitate to attribute the term ‘simple apprehension’ to non-discursive judgements which are the first principles of theoretical and practical reason, but the texts he cites (with the possible exception of *II Sent.* d. 24, q. 3, a. 1) appear inconclusive. Aquinas usually associates *simplex apprehensio* with the first operation rather than the second, and this is not surprising, given the fact that Aristotle (*De An.* 430b26) had claimed that truth cannot be found in simple apprehension but rather in judgement. As Aquinas comments *In De An.* III, lect. 11 (no. 760): “For truth and falsehood consist in a certain adequation or comparison of one thing to another, as when the mind combines or distinguishes; but not in the intelligible object taken by itself.” (See also *De Ver.* q. 1. a. 3 where apprehension is associated with the first operation, in contrast to judgement: “the intellect judges about the thing it has apprehended at the moment when it says something is or is not (*iudicat intellectus de re apprehensa quando dicit aliquid esse vel non esse*). This is the role of intellect composing and dividing.” Also *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 8: “the concurrence of two elements, apprehension and judgement about the thing apprehended, is necessary for knowledge.”

³¹ Aquinas comments *In De An.* III, lect. 11 (no. 762): “essence (*quod quid est*) is what the intellect first knows; hence, just as sight is infallible with respect to its proper object, so is the intellect with respect to essence.”

intelligible species (cf. *ST* I, q. 58, a. 2, ad2)³² while in *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1, ad7 we read: “the gaze of our understanding (*intuitus nostri intellectus*) first fastens on the nature of sensible things.”³³ By using these visual metaphors he reminds his readers of the non-discursive nature of the first operation. Interestingly, Aquinas applies the phrase “intellective vision” (*visio intellectualis*) to both human and angelic apprehension of the quiddity of things.³⁴ Still, our intellect cannot, in a flash of insight, distinguish essence from accident; such insight is possible for us, but only as the result of experience and deliberation.³⁵ With the exceptions

³² Also: *De Ver.* q. 2, a. 6: “the nature of the species by which it [the intellect] sees” (*et speciei per quam intuetur*). Again, in *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 41.1 he compares intellective knowing with sensory vision, writing that “a thing whose likeness exists in the intellect is known through the intellect by way of vision, just as the likeness of a thing which is seen corporeally is present in the sense of the viewer” (*res enim illa per intellectum visionis modo cognoscitur, cuius similitudo in intellectu existit, sicut et similitudo rei corporaliter visae est in sensu videntis*).

³³ Of course, as *De Ver.* q. 2, a. 9, ad3 makes clear, the analogy between the intellective grasping of something, and visual perception, is nothing but a metaphor.

³⁴ *ST* I, q. 57, a. 1, ad2: “it is said (*De Anima* III.6; 430b28) that the object of the intellect is ‘what a thing is,’ regarding which it does not err; as neither does sense regarding its proper sensible object. So therefore the essences of material things are in the intellect of man and angels, as the thing understood is in him who understands, and not according to their real natures. But some things are in an intellect or in the soul according to both natures; and in either case there is intellectual vision” (*Et utrorumque est visio intellectualis*).

³⁵ R. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 329. Aquinas writes: “If our intellect could immediately perceive (*videret*) the truth of the conclusion in the principle, it would never

of an inchoative grasp of things (“a fly”) and the understanding of first principles (of which we have an immediate, intellectual grasp), we need the operations of judgement and reasoning to acquire knowledge of things. In short, following Aristotle, Aquinas conceives the first two operations in intellectual terms, although we need ratiocination to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to come to know an intelligible truth.³⁶

It seems, however, that Aquinas associates contemplation in the strict sense primarily with the non-discursive, simple understanding which crowns the three operations: strictly speaking, contemplation does not extend to all intellectual dimensions of the operations of the intellect, but only to the simple grasp of truth in which these operations come to fulfilment. To substantiate this claim, two observations must be made. First, it should be noted that the three operations—namely the grasping of indivisibles, composition and division, and reasoning—are clearly ordered towards one another. In the “Introduction” to his *Exposition of Aristotle’s On Interpretation*, Aquinas explains that the first operation is ordered to the second, and the second to the third. This third operation, reasoning, finds its term and fulfilment in intellectual rest of understanding and *simplex intuitus*, which is the ultimate goal of our cognitive process. In short, the first operation—grasping the quiddity—is ordered

understand by discursion and reasoning (*discurrendo et ratiocinando*). In like manner, if the intellect in apprehending the quiddity of the subject were at once to have knowledge of all that can be attributed to, or removed from, the subject, it would never understand by composing and dividing, but only by understanding the essence.” (*ST I*, q. 58, a. 4)

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8: *Intelligere enim est simpliciter veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere. Ratiocinari autem est procedere de uno intellecto ad aliud, ad veritatem intelligibilem cognoscendam.*

towards the second operation, namely the formation of judgements; and judgements, in turn, enable us to reason—the third operation—which comes to fruition in the insight of *intellectus*.³⁷ Secondly, Aquinas states that the understanding that arises from the operations of the intellect constitutes the culminating act of contemplation. Hence, contemplation is especially associated with the intuitive, simple, non-discursive act which fulfils and crowns the other operations.³⁸ This is the main thesis of *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 3. In that article Aquinas raises the question whether there are various acts (*actus*) in the contemplative life. He first reiterates that while angels perceive truth by simple apprehension, we arrive at a gaze (or insight) into simple truth by progressive steps from a plurality of things (*angelus simplicii apprehensione veritatem intuetur; homo autem quodam processu ex multis pertingit ad intuitum simplicis veritatis*). He then states:

Accordingly, then, the contemplative life has one act wherein it is finally completed (*finaliter perficitur*), namely the contemplation of truth, and from this act it derives its unity. Yet it has many acts whereby it arrives at this final act. Some of these pertain to the reception of principles (*acceptatio principiorum*), from which it proceeds to the contemplation of truth; others are concerned with deducing from the principles (*deductio principiorum*), the truth, the knowledge of which is sought; and the last and crowning act (*ultimus autem completivus actus*) is the contemplation of the truth.

³⁷ *De Ver.* q. 14, a. 9: When we attain this understanding or comprehension of things “the gaze of the intellect is fixed” (*intuitus intellectus in eis figatur*) on them, and we give assent to them “because of the witness of our own understanding.”

³⁸ See *ST* II-II, q.180, a. 6, ad2: “In contemplation discoursing must be laid aside (*cessante discursu*) and the soul’s gaze fixed on the contemplation of the one simple truth.”

I take the *acceptatio principiorum* from which we proceed towards truth, and the *deductio principiorum* to refer to the two reasoning processes discussed earlier (cf. *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8), namely, the *via inventionis* and the *via iudicii*. From the conclusion Aquinas draws it is clear that these two reasoning processes culminate, and come to fruition in, an intellectual understanding, which is the acme and fulfilment of contemplation. Thus, while the two operations Aquinas usually identifies (grasping the quiddity, and composition and division) are intellectual in nature, contemplation is especially associated with the simple, non-discursive understanding which crowns our reasoning processes. It is the moment of insight which follows upon, and crowns, the discursive reasoning process and which, in turn, makes further reasoning possible in a circular movement: “the discourse of reason always begins from an understanding and ends at an understanding; because we reason by proceeding from certain understood principles, and the discourse of reason is perfected when we come to understand what previously did not know.”³⁹ It is this terminus of human reasoning which is the high-point of human understanding; it is this which mirrors the intellectual operation of angels, as we will see; and it is this which pertains especially to contemplation.

This raises the question: What is the status of this contemplative act of intuitive understanding? Is it a fourth act, distinct from, and perhaps irreducible to, the previous three acts? If this could be shown to be the case, it would strengthen my claim that Aquinas transcends the Aristotelian framework, not simply by identifying a third operation beside the apprehension of indivisibles and judgement, but by claiming that contemplation actually culminates perhaps in an extra, crowning act (*ultimus autem completivus actus*).

³⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1, ad2.

Someone could counter, however, that there are a number of texts that sit uneasily with such a reading. After all, there are many texts in which Aquinas equates understanding with the grasping of essence, or judgement. Thus, in Aristotelian terms, the understanding that ensues from our reasoning process (the third operation) can be characterised perfectly well as an instance of either the first operation (more particularly, a second-stage first act, in which we fully grasp the essence), or the second operation; it does not necessarily have to be another act beyond the three already identified.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Aquinas's characterisation of human knowing in terms of circularity⁴¹ seems also to be at odds with reading *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 3 as implying that our understanding culminates in a fourth, irreducible act.

While I grant these points, it should be remembered that question 180, article 3 specifically concerns contemplation, rather than understanding in general. It is not clear that contemplation and understanding can simply be equated: the former is more specific,

⁴⁰ The same line of argument applies to the generation of the inner word. Aquinas contrasts *cogitatio* or discursive thinking, and the word, which is “formed according to perfect contemplation of the truth.” (see *In Joh.* ch. 1 lect. 1, no. 26; also: *De Pot.* q. 8, a. 1 and q. 9, a. 5). Now, this inner word can be either concept or judgement, as Bernard Lonergan pointed out in *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, 17. Lonergan refers in this context to *De Ver.* q. 11, a. 1 to back up his point that conceptions of the intellect can be complex, or simple.

⁴¹ *Intellectus* occurs, not just at the beginning of a process of reasoning but also when genuine understanding occurs at the end of a reasoning process, creating a dynamic circularity. See *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 8, ad10: “the circularity is observed in this, that reason reaches conclusions from principles by way of discovery, and by way of judgement examines the conclusions which have been found, analysing them back to the principles.”

referring to a non-discursive insight (*intuitus*) into primarily divine truth, while understanding covers a broader range.⁴² Hence, contemplative understanding could still be interpreted as an act which cannot be fully captured in terms of the three operations. More importantly, q.180, a. 3 appears to make a fairly clear distinction between the many acts whereby it arrives at this unity [of contemplating truth], and the final contemplative act itself (*contemplativa vita (...) habet autem multos actus quibus pervenit ad hunc actum finalem*).⁴³ Finally, there is an

⁴² The range of *intellectus* is much broader, as Aquinas makes clear in *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

Having reiterated his etymological view that *intellectus* is derived from *intus legere*, penetrating into the essence of things, he goes on to say: “Now there are many kinds of things that are hidden within, to find which human knowledge has to penetrate within so to speak. Thus, under the accidents lies hidden the nature of the substantial reality, under words lies hidden their meaning; under likenesses and figures the truth they denote lies hidden (because the intelligible world is enclosed within as compared with the sensible world, which is perceived externally), and effects lie hidden in their causes, and vice versa. Hence we may speak of understanding (*intellectus*) with regard to all these things.” While contemplation extends to created effects, Aquinas associates the contemplative life primarily—but not exclusively—with contemplation of divine truth. See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: “That which belongs principally (*principaliter*) to the contemplative life is the contemplation of divine truth, because this contemplation is the end of the whole human life.” See also *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 7 and q. 181, a. 4, ad2.

⁴³ See also *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 6, ad2: after he has explained that the discoursing of reason should be put aside in contemplation, he writes: “This is done by directing all the soul’s operations to the simple contemplation of the intelligible truth (*omnes operationes animae reducuntur ad simplicem contemplationem intelligibilis veritatis*), and this is indicated by his

important hint in *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4 how Aquinas sees the relation between the final contemplative act and the acts of inquiry (*inventio*) and judgement (*via iudicii*) preceding it. In article 4 Aquinas raises the question whether the contemplative life consists in mere contemplation of God, or in the consideration of any truth. Aquinas had already explained in article 2 that the moral virtues prepare us for the contemplative life “dispositively” (by assisting us in attaining serenity), although moral virtues do not belong to it “essentially.” In article 3 he discusses different acts which contemplation crowns, and he mentions inquiry and judgement. In article 4, then, he argues that contemplation of divine truth is the principal end of the contemplative life (with a reference to 1 Cor. 13:12), although God’s effects (in our created world) can assist us in attaining knowledge of God (with a reference to Rom. 1:20, which suggests he has philosophical contemplation in mind). Anyhow, he concludes the discussion in the following manner: “Accordingly, it is clear from what has been said [articles 2–4] that four things pertain, in a certain order, to the contemplative life; first the moral virtues [discussed in art. 2]; second, other acts exclusive of contemplation (*alii actus praeter contemplationem*) [discussed in art. 3]; third, contemplation of the divine effects [discussed in art. 4]; the fourth contemplative factor is the contemplation of the divine truth itself [*ibid.*].”⁴⁴ Here Aquinas calls the crowning act of contemplation “a fourth” factor,

[Pseudo-Dionysius’] saying (...) that the soul’s intellectual powers must be uniformly concentrated, in other words, that discoursing must be laid aside and the soul’s gaze fixed on the contemplation of the one simple truth” (*cessante discursu, figatur ejus intuitus in contemplatio unius simplicis veritatis*).

⁴⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4. I follow the Leonine edition which has “quartum vero contemplativum” instead of “quartum vero et completivum” (as the Blackfriars’ Edition has it).

which seems to further strengthen the claim that he seems keen to distinguish the contemplative act from the other acts of the intellect. Furthermore, it is remarkable that Aquinas calls the acts of the intellect discussed in article 3 *praeter contemplationem*, that is, acts “other than” (Blackfriars) or “exclusive of” (Shapcote’s translation) “contemplation.” This would further suggest that Aquinas wants to interpret the ultimate act of contemplation in terms distinct from, if not irreducible to, the other operations of the intellect.

While I grant that these arguments regarding the exact status of the final contemplative act in relation to the first two operations may not be entirely conclusive, it is nonetheless clear that *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 3 supports the view that contemplative understanding must indeed be characterised as simple insight into the truth in which the other three operations come to fulfilment. Now I want to examine in some more detail the simplicity of this act, and how its intellectivity is distinct from the composite nature of our ratiocinative processes. This will bring us to my core argument, as to why I believe Aquinas’s notion of contemplation is deeply indebted to Neoplatonic sources, and should not be interpreted solely in Aristotelian terms.

II.

Intellectus, Ratio and Aquinas’s Neoplatonic Sources

When making the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, which is central to his notion of contemplation as *intuitus simplex*, Aquinas invariably draws on the writings of Ps.-Dionysius

and Boethius.⁴⁵ In my view, the mere fact that he only cites Neoplatonic sources should give us pause for thought, for Aristotle is, of course, also familiar with the distinction between *noein* and *dianoesthai* (such as in *De An.* 429a23–4; 408b18–31).⁴⁶ Moreover, the discussion of the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* usually involves an outline of the differences and similarities between human and angelic cognition, and again Aquinas cites consistently Pseudo-Dionysius.⁴⁷ Given the fact that most scholars associate Aquinas’s views on contemplation almost exclusively with Aristotle, I will list a number of key passages in which he draws on non-Aristotelian sources. First, I will discuss those passages in which Aquinas contrasts *intellectus* and *ratio*. This distinction, as I indicated, is pivotal in his understanding of contemplation. Following this, I will also look at the notion of simplicity.

I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad4 is probably one of the first texts in which Aquinas draws on Pseudo-Dionysius to clarify the distinction between rational and intellectual beings. The distinction deals with our knowledge of God through created beings, including humans (as

⁴⁵ In the sample of seventeen passages I listed earlier (see footnote 13)—which does not even include passages from his *Commentary on The Divine Names*—Aquinas refers eight times to Ps-Dionysius, four times to Boethius, and in six instances there is no explicit reference to a source. He never refers to Aristotle in this context.

⁴⁶ For a brief discussion, see Nathan R. Colaner, chapter 5 “Using the Principles: Contemplation and Demonstration” from *Aristotle on Knowledge of Nature and Modern Skepticism* (MD: Lexington, 2014), 104ff.

⁴⁷ In I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad4 he refers to *De Coel. Hier.* ch.4; see also Peghaire, *Intellectus et Ratio...*, 31–3.

made in the image of God). One of the objections quotes *De Coel. Hier.* IV.2,⁴⁸ and states that we are not intellective but rational, and therefore *intelligentia* cannot be considered to cover what it means to have been made in the image of God. The Reply to the objection deserves to be quoted in full:

As Dionysius says (*De Div. Nom.* VII) an inferior nature reaches in its pinnacle the lowest point of a superior nature (*secundum supremum sui attingit infimum naturae superioris*), and this is why the soul attains the lowest point of the angelic nature; and therefore it participates in its pinnacle somehow in intellectivity. Because the image is located in the best part of the soul, it is located in intelligence rather than in reason (*secundum intelligentiam, quam secundum rationem*), for reason is nothing else but obscured intellective nature (*natura intellectualis obumbrata*). This is why reason knows by inquiring and in temporal succession that which is presented to the intellect immediately and in full light (*statim et plena luce*).⁴⁹

Aquinas discusses the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* again in III *Sent.* d. 35, q. 2, a.2, qc.1 co, when dealing with *intellectus* as a gift of the Holy Spirit. In this context he does not explicitly quote Ps-Dionysius. Another early passage is from *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1 (c) where Aquinas contrasts the rational method, characteristic of natural philosophy, to the

⁴⁸ I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1 ad4 quotes *De Coel. Hier.* IV.1, where Pseudo-Dionysius distinguishes between four degrees of being, namely intellective (*intellectualia*), rational (*rationalia*), sensible (*sensibilia*), and those that simply are (*simpliciter existentia*).

⁴⁹ I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a.1, ad4; see also II *Sent.* d. 9, q. 1, a. 8, ad1 (on the Pseudo-Dionysian distinction between the four degrees of being): *In cognitionem veritatis ratio inquirendo perveniat, quam intellectus simplici intuitu videt.*

intellectual method which he attributes to metaphysics or divine science. This requires him to distinguish between *ratio* and *intellectus*, and he does so as follows:

Now reason differs from intellect as multitude does from unity. Thus Boethius says that reasoning is related to understanding as time to eternity and as a circle to its centre. For it is distinctive of reason to disperse itself in the consideration of many things, and to gather one simple truth from them. Thus Dionysius says: ‘Souls have the power of reasoning in that they approach the truth of things from various angles, and in this respect they are inferior to the angels; but inasmuch as they gather a multiplicity into unity they are equal to the angels.’ Conversely, intellect first contemplates a truth one and undivided and in that truth comprehends a whole multitude, as God, by knowing his essence, knows all things. Thus Dionysius says: ‘Angelic minds have the power of intellect in that they understand divine truths in a unified way.’ It is clear, then, that rational thinking ends in intellectual thinking, following the process of analysis, in which reason gathers one simple truth from many things. And again, intellectual thinking is the beginning of rational thinking, following the process of synthesis, in which the intellect comprehends a multiplicity in unity.⁵⁰

The quotation from Boethius is from *De Consol. Phil.* IV, prosa 6. The quotations from Ps-Dionysius are from *De Div. Nom.* VII, no. 2. In order for the human mind to acquire knowledge it must begin from a simple perception of truth, such as understanding of principles; and we reach certainty when we examine what we have found by ‘reducing’ (analysis) or verifying it in light of first principles. Thus the dialectic (in the Hegelian sense of the word) between rest-movement-rest is described in terms of synthesis (where we grasp

⁵⁰ *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1; translation by A. Maurer from *Thomas Aquinas. The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: PIMS, 1986), 70–1

an undivided truth in which we comprehend a multitude) and analysis (in which we grasp one truth from many things: *ratio ex multis colligit unam et simplicem veritatem*).⁵¹ For Aquinas, our ways of knowing reflect the structure of reality. In the order of reality, synthesis reflects the movement from causes to effects, while analysis reflects the movement from effects to causes. In the mental order, we move by synthesis from the most general or universal forms to more particular ones, and by analysis from more particular ones to more universal ones.⁵² Incidentally, given the fact that analysis has an orientation towards the universal, which comes to fruition in the consideration of being and the properties of being (i.e., the objects of divine science), Aquinas argues in this text (*Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1) that thinking in divine science is supremely intellective, and that divine science offers the starting point of the other sciences: “divine science gives principles to all the other sciences, because intellective thinking is the starting point of rational thinking.”⁵³

It is again the writings of Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius that Aquinas refers to in his most extensive treatment of the relation between *ratio* and *intellectus*, namely *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1 (“Are understanding and reason different powers in man?”). The entire reply extends to three pages, and cannot be discussed in detail here. This passage captures the essence of the reply:

⁵¹ *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1; see also *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1: “understanding is the source of reasoning in the process of discovery, and its term in that of judging” (*ut sic intellectus inveniatur rationis principium quantum ad viam inveniendi, terminus vero quantum ad viam judicandi*).

⁵² *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1; also *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 8, ad10; *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8

⁵³ *Expos. De Trin.* q. 6, a. 1. I have altered Maurer’s translation (p. 73) somewhat, replacing “intellectual” by “intellective.”

Movement is related to rest as to its source and term, as is reason, also, which is related to understanding as movement to rest and generation to existence, as is clear from the citation from Boethius [*De Consol. Phil.* IV, prosa 6] given above. (...) Consequently, although the knowledge proper to the human soul takes place through the process of reasoning, nevertheless, it participates to some extent in that simple knowledge which exists in higher substances, and because of which they are said to have intellective power. This is in keeping with the rule which Dionysius gives, that divine wisdom ‘always joins the limits of higher things to the beginning of the lower things.’ This is to say that the lower nature at its highest point reaches something of that which is the lowest in the higher nature. Dionysius also points out his difference between angels and souls when he says: ‘From divine wisdom the intellectual powers of angelic minds have pure and good acts of understanding (*intellectuales angelicarum mentium virtutes, simplices et bonos habent intellectus*), not gathering divine knowledge from divisible things or the senses or extended discussions, but uniformly understanding the intelligible things of God.’ Later he adds about souls: Therefore, because of the divine wisdom, souls have rationality, too, ‘but spread out, circling about the truth of existing things, by the diversity of division falling short of unitive minds. But through the reduction of many things to one by reflection souls are held worthy of acts of understanding equal to those of angels, in so far as this is proper and possible to souls.’

Aquinas’s sources for the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* are, again, Boethius⁵⁴ and

⁵⁴ Boethius’s *De Consol. Phil.* is quoted extensively in *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1, obj 8-10. For instance in obj. 8 we have: *intelligentia vero celsior oculus existit: supergressa namque universitatis ambitum ipsam illam simplicem formam pura mentis acie intuetur.*” Obj. 9

Ps-Dionysius. At the beginning of this paper I have already quoted *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8 which also includes references to Boethius (in reply 2) and Ps-Dionysius (in the main body). Again, in *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 3 he quotes from *The Divine Names*.⁵⁵ There is no need to list all the relevant texts. Whenever he quotes an authority to draw the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, it is Ps-Dionysius and/or (less often) Boethius. It is clear that Aquinas does not refer Aristotle to explain the distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*.

The quotation from *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1 makes clear that we share to some degree in the intellectivity of angels. When he is discussing human cognition (as in *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8), Aquinas often draws an illuminating contrast with angelic intellectivity, thereby strengthening his claim that intellectivity characterises the apex of human understanding and contemplation.⁵⁶ The Neoplatonic notion of hierarchy, and our participation in it, allows Aquinas to situate human cognition within a Neoplatonic setting: through the intellectualive

reads: “*Praeterea, Boetius dicit in IV de consolatione: uti est ad intellectum ratiocinatio; ad id quod est, id quod gignitur; ad aeternitatem tempus; ad punctum medium circulus: ita est fati series mobilis ad providentiae divinae stabilem simplicitatem.*” He does not refute the quoted texts in his replies.

⁵⁵ Obviously, one could include Aquinas’s own *Commentary on the Divine Names* in this list as well.

⁵⁶ This is by no means an obvious move. For instance, in the section “De Anima Rationali” from his *De Homine* (p. 393–473 from Cologne edition) Albert the Great did not have recourse to the ways in which angels know to outline human cognition and the nature of our intellect in particular.

dimension of our understanding we share, no matter how inadequately, in a hierarchy⁵⁷ which places us within ‘touching distance’ from angels⁵⁸ who enjoy “a simple view of the truth

⁵⁷ The Neoplatonic concept of hierarchy inspired Aquinas to attribute the intellectual dimension to humans. Aquinas would have encountered the concept of hierarchy through two sources: *Liber de Causis*, prop. 31 and the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. In *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 68.6 he again quotes from *The Divine Names*, writing that “divine wisdom has united the ends of higher things with the beginning of the lower”, and he encourages us “to contemplate the marvellous connection of things,” in which “it is always found that the lowest in the higher genus touches the highest of the lower species.” Hierarchy contributes to the diversity and beauty of the universe (*Summa contra Gentiles* III, 97.3). Brute animals do not have *ratio* but they have natural judgement; so too, we, although mainly rational, share (“in a slight participation”) in the understanding which angels enjoy (*De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1).

⁵⁸ In *De Ver.* q. 8, a. 15 Aquinas compares our simple insight into first principles (without discourse) to the natural knowledge of angels: “There necessarily are some things in our intellect which it knows naturally, namely, first principles—even though in us this knowledge is not caused unless we receive something through our senses. Therefore, the relation of our intellect to those principles is similar to that which an angel has to all that he knows naturally. And since the knowledge we have of principles is the highest form of our knowledge, it is evident that on this summit of our nature we reach to some extent the lowest point of an angel’s. For, as Dionysius says: ‘The divine wisdom has linked the boundaries of the first creatures to the place where the second begin.’ (*De Div. Nom.*, VII.3). Consequently, just as we know principles by simple intuition without discourse (*sicut nos sine discursu principia cognoscimus simplici intuitu*), so do the angels know all they know in the same fashion. This

without any discourse or inquiry.”⁵⁹ Our rationality is a kind of shadow⁶⁰ of the pure intellectivity of angels, which it mirrors, and in which it participates,⁶¹ no matter how imperfectly.

At first sight the differences between human and angelic cognition appear considerable. The knowledge of angels is immutable (*immobilis*), for they directly see the pure truth by a simple intuition, without any discursive movement, beyond time.⁶² Their act of understanding is

is why they are called ‘intellectual’ (*intellectuales*), and why our habit of principles has the same name.”

⁵⁹ *De Ver.* q. 24, a. 3. Also *Expos. De Trin.* q. 2, a. 2: God knows “by simple intuition without any reasoning process.” *ST I*, q. 59, a. 1, ad1: “the intellect knows by simple intuition (*simplici intuitu*), while reason knows by a process of discursion from one thing to another.” See also *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8.

⁶⁰ The metaphor of shadow, which Aquinas repeatedly uses, is derived from Isaac Israeli: *Ratio oritur in umbra intelligentiae*. (II *Sent.* d. 3, q. 1, a. 6; see also: I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad4; d. 25, q. 1, a. 1, ad4; III *Sent.* d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, sol. 2, ad3; *Expos. De Trin.* q. 1, a. 1, ad4; *De Ver.* q. 5, a. 8; q. 8, a. 3, ad3; and q. 24, a. 3. Albert the Great is familiar with this source, and refers to it in his *Commentary on The Divine Names*, VII (p. 342.81; 360.34 from Cologne edition) and other places (e.g., *De Hom.* 409.2).

⁶¹ We are intellectual *per participationem* (*ST I*, q. 108, a. 5). For the notion of participation, see Rudi te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1997)

⁶² *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 91.5. Similarly, in *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 96.10: “time does not enter into the intellectual operation of separate substances. For just as things intelligible in act are without place, so, too, are they outside of time; following upon local movement, time measures only such things as exist somehow in place. Thus, the understanding exercised

simplex; they have a habitual knowledge of all they know.⁶³ Whereas angels have an immediate grasp of truth beyond temporal succession (*sine continuo et tempore*)⁶⁴ through the intermediary of innate intelligible species (*ST* I, q. 55, a. 2), we know through the intermediary of the sensible species in a discursive manner. Nonetheless, we too share in intellectivity: “The human soul, according to what is highest in it, attains to that which is proper to angelic nature, so that it knows some things at once and without investigation (*anima humana, quantum ad id quod in ipsa supremum est, aliquid attingit de eo quod proprium est angelicae naturae; scilicet ut aliquorum cognitionem habeat subito et sine inquisitione*) although it is lower than angels in this, that it can know the truth in these things only by receiving something from sense.”⁶⁵

The previous discussion raises the question: why would Aquinas have drawn on Ps-Dionysius and Boethius rather than on Aristotle to develop the intellectual notion of contemplation? We can only speculate about the reasons why Aquinas, as a matter of fact, does not appeal to

by a separate substance is above time; whereas time touches our intellectual operation, through the fact that we obtain knowledge from phantasms, which have a determinate temporal reference.”

⁶³ *De Malo* q. 16, a. 5; *ST* I, q. 64, a. 2; *De Ver.* q. 16, a. 1

⁶⁴ *III Sent.* d. 14, q. 1, a. 3, sol. 2

⁶⁵ *De Ver.* q. 16, a. 1; cf. also *De Malo* q. 16, a. 5; *De Ver.* q. 8, a. 15. Before I leave this discussion of angelic cognition, it should be pointed out that there are Christological and eschatological aspects involved as well. The blessed before the resurrection can know without recourse to phantasms. Christ too, who was both *comprehensor* and *viator*, did not have to rely on discursive reasoning to acquire knowledge, as he enjoyed divinely infused knowledge. (*ST* III, q. 11, a. 2 and 3; see also *De Ver.* q. 10, a. 11, ad3).

Aristotle in this context—for he gives us no indication. Moreover, an in-depth answer to this question would require an exhaustive comparison of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s views on contemplation, *scientia*, *intellectus* and *sapientia*—an enterprise I cannot undertake within the confines of this paper. Still, we can hint at a possible answer.

Aristotle uses *nous* both in a general sense to include all operations of reason (e.g. 429a23), and to refer to a non-discursive apprehension of first principles, as distinct from *dianoia* (discursive reasoning). When he uses it in a more restricted sense, such as in *Posterior Analytics*, *nous* (*intellectus*) refers to grasping first principles, which are necessary to generate the reasoning process in the first place, and avoid an infinite regress. Given the fact that Aristotle too acknowledges the non-discursive nature of *nous*, which simply accepts certain principles without argument or deduction, why then does Aquinas refer to Neoplatonic sources when discussing intellectual contemplation?

Specifically in the context of contemplation a characteristic (and well-known) passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.6 (1140b31-1141a8) may suggest an answer.⁶⁶ Here Aristotle discusses the intellectual virtues of *nous* (*intellectus*), *episteme* (*scientia*), and *sophia* (*sapientia*); the latter is the most excellent and characteristic virtue of the contemplative person. He explains that because *episteme* involves reason (*meta logou*) the insight into first principles is not a matter of *episteme* but of *nous*: “what is scientifically known is demonstrable” while first principles are not. Thus, the end-result of demonstrative reasoning is called *episteme* (*scientia*), and it always presupposes reasoning (*meta logou*): *scientia* is from conclusions, *intellectus* from principles. After having reiterated that “understanding and

⁶⁶ While the main discussion of contemplation can be found in Bk X, for our purposes the discussion in Bk VI is more rewarding as this is where Aristotle explicitly deals with the intellectual virtues.

not reasoning deals with first principles,” he adds: “nor is wisdom [exclusively] about origins; for it is proper to the wise person to have a demonstration of some things” (*apodeixis*).⁶⁷ He then goes on to describe wisdom as the combination of understanding and episteme: “the wise person must not only know what is derived from the origins of a science, but also grasp the truth about the origins. Therefore wisdom is understanding plus scientific knowledge.” These passages indicate that not just *episteme* but *sophia* as well (as the combination of intellectual apprehension of principles and demonstrative reasoning) remains intrinsically linked with *apodeixis*, and remain therefore non-simple or composite. In short, Aristotle generally associates the outcome of the demonstrative reasoning process with *episteme*, rather than with *nous*: *nous* is primarily concerned with principles⁶⁸ while *episteme/science* is the outcome of demonstrative reasoning.⁶⁹ Also, it seems doubtful that, for Aristotle, *episteme* (which is essentially a grasp of demonstration, cf. *Post. An.* I.2) can be simple. The same applies, I suspect, to Aristotle’s *sophia* (as the combination of *nous* and *episteme*), which remains apodeictic. Aquinas, at least in his own theological syntheses (as distinct from the Commentaries on Aristotle) explicitly allows for the possibility that the outcome of our reasoning process can be simple or non-composite, and he draws on Neoplatonic sources—especially Pseudo-Dionysius—to make this point. For Aquinas, there are instances in which both science and wisdom can be simple or non-composite. I will

⁶⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141a1-3. I have made use of the translation by Terence Irwin, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (IN: Indianapolis, 1985), 156–7

⁶⁸ *Post. An.*, 100b5

⁶⁹ In Aquinas’s words—when commenting on Aristotle’s *De Anima* 428a16-18, III, lect.5 (no. 648): “simple understanding bears upon first principles, and science upon demonstrated conclusions.”

suggest that Aquinas had good reasons—albeit theological ones—to identify contemplation with a simple understanding of truth rather than with Aristotelian *scientia* or *sapientia*, which remain composite.

In his *Commentary on the Divine Names*, ch. 7, no. 711ff. Aquinas draws a clear contrast between the composite nature of the two reasoning processes, and the simplicity of intellectual insight. Both the *via inventionis* and the *via iudicii* are composite.⁷⁰ Again he draws an analogy with angelic cognition, and concludes with a clear assertion of the simplicity of human understanding: “the inquiry of reason ends in a simple understanding of truth (*inquisitio enim rationis ad simplicem intelligentiam veritatis terminatur*), just as it begins from a simple understanding of truth considered in the first principles. It is for this reason that in the process of reasoning there is a reflective movement (*convolutio*) similar to a circle, as reason, starting from unity (*ab uno*), proceeding through multiplicity, ends at oneness.”⁷¹

In summary, Aquinas calls the *via inventionis* and *via iudicii* composite; but these operations of the intellect presuppose, and culminate in, a simple understanding. An answer to our question why Aquinas refers to Neoplatonic sources (such as Ps-Dionysius or Boethius)

⁷⁰ *Commentary on The Divine Names*, no. 711: *duplex compositio intellectus: una quidem quae pertinet ad inventionem veritatis, alia vero quae pertinet ad iudicium*. The way Aquinas characterises judgement here (“we proceed from a universal principle to apply it to multiple and particular realities which are its effect”: *In iudicio, vero, procedimus ab aliquo communi principio ad praedicta multa et divisibilia sive particularia sui effectus et signa*) appears somewhat different from other texts discussed in this paper, such as *Expos. De Trin*, q. 6, a. 1 and *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8.

⁷¹ *Commentary on The Divine Names*, no. 713; see also *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 6, ad2

rather than to Aristotle when treating of the theme of simple or non-composite nature of understanding (which constitutes the essential dimension of contemplation), now suggests itself. The reason may be that the outcome of Aristotelian reasoning remains too apodeictic for Aquinas, and therefore cannot fully accommodate his notion *simplex intuitus*, a simple apprehension of (divine) truth.

It must be said that it is not entirely clear from where Aquinas adopted this notion of *intuitus simplex*—that is, if it is not his own. When distinguishing between *discernere*, *cogitare* and *intelligere*, he seems to associate the characterisation of *intelligere* as *simplex intuitus* with the writings of Augustine (cf. I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 5) but scholars have been unable to find its

source.⁷² As we have seen, he usually associates it with the writings of Ps-Dionysius.⁷³ We

⁷² The full quote is: *Respondeo dicendum, quod, secundum Augustinum, De util.*

Credendi, cap. XI, differunt cogitare, discernere et intelligere. Discernere est cognoscere rem per differentiam sui ab aliis. Cogitare autem est considerare rem secundum partes et proprietates suas: unde cogitare dicitur quasi coagitare. Intelligere autem dicit nihil aliud quam simplicem intuitum intellectus in id quod sibi est praesens intelligibile. The reference to *De Util. Cred.* is unhelpful for our purposes. See also: I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 5, c. 49: *Intelligere nihil aliud est quam simplicem intuitum intellectus in id quod sibi est praesens intelligibile*; I *Sent.*, d. 3, q. 4, a. 5, c. 50: *Intelligere nihil aliud dicit quam intuitum, qui nihil aliud est quam praesentia intelligibilis ad intellectum quocumque modo*; I *Sent.* d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad5: *Intelligere autem dicit intueri.* Perhaps a remote inspiration here was the Pseudo-Augustinian *De Spiritu et Anima*, chs 1 and 23, which Aquinas quotes in *De Ver.* q. 15, a. 1: “the sight of the soul by which it looks at the true” (*quo per seipsum verum intuetur; ratiocinatio autem est rationis inquisitio*)—although Aquinas expressed doubts about the authenticity of this work.

⁷³ Aquinas quotes Pseudo-Dionysius (from *De Div. Nom.* IV, 8) for instance, in *De Ver.* q. 8, a. 15: *Ut enim dicit Dionysius, VII de Divin. Nomin., divina sapientia fines primorum coniungit principiis secundorum. Unde sicut nos sine discursu principia cognoscimus simplici intuitu, ita et Angeli omnia quae cognoscunt; unde et intellectuales dicuntur.* In *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1, obj. 2 he also refers to *De Div. Nom.* VII for the distinction between discursive and multiple reasoning and a knowledge in a simple manner (*simpliciter*) through *intellectus*: “the mode of human nature is to know the truth, not simply (which is a sign of understanding) but discursively (which is a sign of reason), as Dionysius explains (*Div. Nom.* VII).”

should not ignore the source Aquinas himself refers to when he characterises contemplation as *simplex intuitus veritatis*, namely Richard of St Victor, who is being quoted as saying that “contemplation is the soul’s penetrating and free gaze on things perceived” (*perispicax et liber contuitus animi in res perspiciendas*). None of these authors, however, uses the exact phrase *intuitus simplex*. Aquinas’s teacher, Albert the Great, uses the term *simplex intuitus* a number of times, but mostly in his late *Summa Theologiae* rather than in earlier works, which should make us hesitant in assuming that Albert influenced Aquinas; it may very well be the other way around.⁷⁴ In summary, scholars have not been able to trace the exact textual source

⁷⁴ A scholarly paper examining the relation between Albert and Aquinas on contemplation (and the role of *simplex intuitus*) would be highly desirable. There is one instance of *intuitus simplex* in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (in I *Sent.* d. 3, a. 29, p. 130a, on self-understanding in the context of a discussion of the circumincession of *memoria*, *intellectus* and *voluntas*, where Albert also refers to Augustine: *Intelligere vero nihil aliud quam notitiae specie vel essentia notitiae se intueri simpliciter sine consideratione sui et discretionem suae naturae, quia hoc vocat Augustinus intelligere se: et discernere se et cogitare se plus secundum eum dicunt quam intelligere se. Cum igitur intelligere se non ponat discretionem sui, sed simplicem intuitum sine discretionem et cogitationem, dico quod non ponit conversionem intellectus*.) Albert uses the phrase *intuitus simplex* mostly in his *Summa Theologiae*, usually to refer to divine cognition: Pars I, tract. 3, q. 13, m. 1 (p. 56a, on our knowledge of God’s essence), tract. 3, q. 13, m. 4 (p. 65b, on knowing God face to face); tract. 15, q. 60, m. 2 (p. 604a, on divine cognition); tract. 15, q. 60, m. 4, a. 1 (p. 614a, on divine cognition) and a. 2 (p. 617a, id.); tract. 17, q. 67, m. 2 (p. 681a, on divine providence) and m. 3 (p. 685, id.). Most of these texts relate to knowledge of God. See also Part II tract. 4, q. 14, m. 3 a. 2, partic. 1 (p. 180a, on angelic knowledge) and tract. 15, q. 93, m. 2, (p. 203a, with a reference

of the phrase *intuitus simplex*. Boethius and Ps-Dionysius use the phrase *intelligentia/intellectus simplex* rather than *intuitus simplex*. Nonetheless, it is clear that Aquinas himself, when explaining the phrase, refers to the writings of Ps-Dionysius, Boethius, Richard of St Victor, and (pseudo-)Augustinian works (*De Spiritu et Anima*), but not Aristotle. As suggested, a possible reason for this is that the outcome of demonstrative reasoning is scientific knowledge: *episteme* is a grasp of demonstration, and thus it cannot be simple. Wisdom, too, as a combination of *nous* and *episteme* may remain irretrievably linked to compositeness: “it is proper to the wise person to have a demonstration of things” (*apodeixis*).

III.

Towards a More Inclusive Notion of Contemplation: Theological Concerns

to Augustine: *Et a Dionysio dicitur habere discursas scientas, et non simplices et deiformed: quia, sicut dicit Augustinus, in Deo non sunt cogitationes volubiles hinc illinc, aut inde huc: sed omnia uno intuitu et simplici in seipso videt et scit.*) In Part II, tract. 4, q. 14, m. 3 a. 2, part 1 (p. 180a) he says about angels: *Unde boni Angeli ad cognoscendas res singulares non indigent inquisitione, sed simplici intuitu per exemplar artis divinae cognoscunt ea*. In short, Albert applies the notion of *simplex intuitus* mostly to divine or (occasionally) angelic cognition, and (rarely) to human cognition, and then only when discussing the beatific vision. I have quoted from Borgnet edition *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1890–‘99). When Albert uses the notion *simplex intuitus*, he refers to Ps-Dionysius as well. In *Topica*, Lib. I cap. 1, for instance, we read: *Propter quod dicit Dionysius quod discursus est disciplina rationis: simplex autem veritatis intuitus est intellectus*.

I have attempted to show that Aquinas invariably refers to Neoplatonic sources to argue for the intellectual nature of human cognition, which, as we have seen, is central to his notion of contemplation. This raises the broader question: why exactly does *intuitus simplex* occupy such a pivotal role in Aquinas's understanding of contemplation? I will conclude this contribution by hinting at a number of possible (theological) reasons.

Emphasising the intellectual, simple, and non-discursive nature of human cognition has a number of advantages. First, as indicated earlier, it makes clear that to the degree that we, too, are intellectual, we share in a hierarchy which puts us within touching distance of angels, who are entirely intellectual. This matters to Aquinas for whom hierarchy adds to the beauty of the created world.⁷⁵

More importantly, it further supports his view that there is continuity between our ways of knowing on earth, and the beatific vision. The intellectual dimension of contemplation on earth prefigures our non-discursive ways of knowing God in the after-life. This kind of continuity mattered to Aquinas the theologian, for whom grace perfects nature but does not abolish it. Thus, the intellectual nature of contemplation enables Aquinas to argue more cogently that contemplation on earth is an inchoative sharing in heavenly beatitude.⁷⁶

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of inclusivity of contemplation. For Aristotle, the final acme of our reasoning processes appears to remain linked with demonstration and knowledge of causes. For Aquinas the culmination of contemplation is

⁷⁵ *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 97.3

⁷⁶ See *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: *inchoatio beatitudinis, quae hic incipit ut in futuro terminetur*.

clearly intuitive or non-discursive.⁷⁷ In my view it is here that the notions of simplicity and *intuitus simplex* are of particular significance: Aquinas is willing to defend notions of *scientia*, *intellectus* and *sapientia* that are utterly non-composite and non-discursive, especially when he discusses the cognitive gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Given the fact that an exhaustive discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is beyond the confines of this paper, I will focus for present purposes exclusively on Aquinas's treatment of the cognitive gifts of the Holy Spirit in the latter parts of the *Summa Theologiae*. As is well-known, Aquinas changed his views on the gifts of the Holy Spirit throughout his career. It was only towards the end of his career that he appended the gifts to their relevant theological and cardinal virtues. The cognitive gifts of *intellectus* (II-II, q. 8) and *scientia* (II-II, q. 9) are appended to the theological virtue of faith, while *sapientia* (II-II, q. 45) is discussed in the context of charity, and *concilium* (II-II, q. 52) is associated with prudence.

Aquinas refers to the two operations of the intellect to clarify the distinction between the gifts of understanding and knowledge. The gift of understanding is an instance of the first

⁷⁷ See also this early text: III *Sent.* d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 2: "The contemplative life consists in the activity that one assumes (*acceptat*) above all others. (...) Now, the inquiry of reason (*inquisitio rationis*) proceeds from a simple regard of the intellect (*a simplici intuitu intellectus progreditur*)—for one proceeds by starting out from principles which the intellect holds; so too the intellect attains certainty when the conclusions it draws can revert back to the principles through which the intellect attained certainty. This is why the contemplative life consists primarily in the operation of the intellect (*Et ideo vita contemplativa principaliter in operatione intellectus consistit*): the very word 'contemplation' suggests this as it denotes 'vision.' The contemplative person, however, uses rational inquiry (*inquisitione rationis*) so as to attain the vision of contemplation, which is his main goal."

operation (the apprehension of quiddity). It involves a certain perception of the truth,⁷⁸ “an excellence of cognition that penetrates into the heart of things” (*excellencia cognitionis penetrantis ad intima*).⁷⁹

The first objection of *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1 is particularly relevant for our purposes: given the fact that humans know truth discursively (*discursive*), which we associate with *ratio* rather than knowing simply (*simpliciter*), which we usually connect with *intellectus*, we should speak of ‘the gift of reason’ (*donum rationis*) rather than ‘the gift of understanding’ (*intellectus*). In reply, Aquinas reiterates that our reasoning proceeds from, and ends in, understanding. We speak of the gift of understanding (rather than reason) because the gift of understanding is in comparison with what we know supernaturally, what the natural light is in regards to the things we know intuitively and primordially. Thus, the gift of understanding assists us in immediately perceiving the truth (*perceptio veritatis*), and piercing with the mind (*mente penetrare*) into the principles of faith.⁸⁰

It should not strike us as particularly surprising that the gift of understanding is non-discursive. After all, the same can be said about the intellectual virtue of understanding. More significant is how Aquinas characterises the gifts of knowledge and wisdom. The first objection in article 1 of question 9 of the *Secunda Secundae*—the article raises the question whether *scientia* is a gift—cites *An. Post.* I, 2 (71b18), where Aristotle writes that demonstration is a syllogism producing *scientia*. Whereas science is the result (*effectum*) of our natural reasoning efforts, the gift of knowledge surpasses our natural ability. In his reply, Aquinas, while acknowledging that human science is acquired by means of demonstration,

⁷⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 5 ad3

⁷⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1 ad3

⁸⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 6 ad2

argues that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a participated likeness in the divine way of knowing, which is non-discursive and simple:

In God there is a sure judgement of truth without any discursive process, by simple intuition (*absque omni discursu per simplicem intuitum*). Therefore, God's knowledge is not discursive, or ratiocinative, but absolute and simple (*non est discursiva vel ratiocinativa, sed absoluta et simplex*), to which that knowledge is likened which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, since it is a participated likeness thereof (*participata similitudo ipsius*).⁸¹

In short, the non-discursive or intuitive nature of the gift of knowledge is one of the key features that distinguishes it from the intellectual virtue of *scientia*.

Following Augustine, Aquinas distinguishes between the gifts of knowledge and wisdom by linking the former with the cognition of things created, and the latter of things divine.⁸²

Whereas the gift of knowledge pertains to judgements of created things, the gifts of understanding and wisdom, then, are particularly relevant for our contemplation of divine truth.⁸³ I have already outlined the non-discursive nature of the gift of *intellectus*. It is now time to examine the gift of *sapientia*.

The virtue of wisdom and the gift of wisdom both involve judgement according to divine

⁸¹ *ST* II-II, q. 9, a. 1, ad1

⁸² Augustine, *De Trin.* XIII, 24. In *De Trin.* XII, 21-25 Augustine had also associated wisdom with contemplation and knowledge with action, making an interesting distinction between intellectual cognition of eternal things (wisdom), and rational cognition of temporal things (knowledge). For Aquinas's comments, see for instance his *Commentary on Col.* 2:3, no. 81.

⁸³ *ST* II-II, q. 9, a. 4, ad3

norms. The gift of wisdom, however, is characterised by an intuitive judgement, which distinguishes it from the intellectual virtue of wisdom: “It belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgement about divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them.”⁸⁴ Aquinas quotes Ps-Dionysius’s remark from *The Divine Names* ch.2 about Hierotheus who “suffered divine things” through a connaturality or sympathy, which results from the unity with God that charity effects.⁸⁵ In this context Aquinas draws a well-known analogy between right judgement in matters of chastity after a reasoning process, and an instinctive or intuitive awareness how to judge when one has the habit of chastity. Aquinas’s theme of connaturality is well-known.⁸⁶ For our purposes it suffices to state that the gift of wisdom, as connatural, is intuitive and non-discursive.

Yet it is the gift of wisdom which is of central importance in the contemplation of God. Through charity we are intimately united with God, and through the gift of wisdom which flows from charity, we are directed towards contemplation of God (as well as proper action).⁸⁷

Aquinas’s notion of contemplation incorporates central insights from Aristotle. It is, however,

⁸⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2

⁸⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2

⁸⁶ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas. Vol. 2. Spiritual Master* (Washington DC, The Catholic University of America, 2003), 206–24; and Taki Suto, “Virtue and Knowledge: Connatural Knowledge according to Thomas Aquinas” from *The Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2004): 61–79. The work of Linda Zagzebski is also relevant in this context.

⁸⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 3, ad1 and ad3 (*ad sapientiam pertinet contemplatio divinorum, quae est visio principii*); II-II, q. 45, a. 5.

overall far more inclusive. It can accommodate the contemplation of both the philosopher who pursues knowledge and wisdom through discursive reasoning, and the illiterate *vetula* who grasps and subscribes to central articles of the Christian faith—even though she may not be able to reason about them, or refute arguments against them; she just *sees* their truthfulness. In III *Sent.* d. 36, q. 1, a. 3, ad5 (no. 12831) Aquinas explicitly states that all Christians—most of whom do not have the philosophical or theological skills to engage in reasoning and demonstrative argumentation about what they believe—are called to participate in contemplation: “Although all those who are in the active life do not attain to a perfect state of contemplation, every Christian who is in a state of salvation must participate somehow in contemplation, for the commandment is given to all: ‘Be still, and see that I am God.’” (Ps. 45:11). He interprets the third commandment (keeping the Sabbath) in terms of this universal call to contemplation.⁸⁸ Similarly, in *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 6 he rejoices in the fact that “inspiration [is] given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom...” (*ut idiotae et simplices, dono spiritus sancti repleti, summam sapientiam et facundiam in instanti consequerentur*). It further explains why Aquinas considered the Virgin Mary as excelling in contemplation—a view that Aristotle undoubtedly would have found rather puzzling.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ III *Sent.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 3, ad5 *Ad quintum dicendum, quod quamvis ad perfectum statum contemplationis non perveniat omnis qui in vita activa est; tamen omnis Christianus qui in statu salutis est, oportet quod aliquid de contemplatione participet, cum praeceptum sit omnibus: vacate, et videte quoniam ego sum Deus, Psal. 45, 2; ad quod etiam est tertium praeceptum legis.*

⁸⁹ *Sermon Puer Iesus*. See also ST III, q. 27, a. 5, ad3.

Contemplation is the goal of our entire life (*finis totius vitae*). It is a foretaste of heavenly beatitude.⁹⁰ All Christians are called to contemplation but not all Christians have the intellectual capabilities to argue in a rational way about their faith. Hence, Aquinas must make allowances for a kind of contemplative act which is non-discursive and which is available to all Christians through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This explains why the non-discursive notion of intuitive understanding he encountered in the writings of his Neoplatonic sources would have appealed to him. The broad understanding of contemplation as *intuitus simplex* can incorporate the acts of contemplation of the Greek sage, as well as those of the *vetula* who enjoys the benefit of her Christian faith, enabling her to know truths which the philosopher comes to know, if at all, with great difficulty and after laborious reasoning processes.⁹¹

*Mary Immaculate College,
Limerick, Ireland.*

⁹⁰ See *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 7, ad3 and *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 4: *inchoatio beatitudinis*.

⁹¹ See *Sermon Attendite a falsis*, pars 2: *Plus scit modo una vetula de his quae ad fidem pertinent, quam quondam omnes philosophi*. See also *Sermon Beati qui habitant*, where Aquinas contrasts the labours of the philosopher with the short-cut offered by our Lord: *Veritatem cognoscere nisi sunt per exercitium studii. Sed Deus brevioram viam docet, scilicet per cordis mundiciam dicens: beati mundo corde et cetera*.